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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: June 06, 2007

Parliament Approves New Laws

¶1. On Tuesday, the Austrian parliament approved a major reform of the election laws, lowering the legal voting age to 16 and extending the legislative period to five years. Semi-official daily "Wiener Zeitung" reports on the new legislation, which applies to national elections, but also requires provincial governments to likewise lower the voting age within six months. Some provinces have already introduced the measure. Education in politics will begin at a younger age in Austrian schools. The extension of the legislative period from four to five years will begin with the next government. Parliament also approved three ombudsmen and -women. They are Peter Kostelka of the Social Democrats (SPOe), Maria Fekter of the People's Party (OeVP), and Terezija Stojsits of the Greens.

New Director for the State Opera to Be Appointed

¶2. Minister for Cultural Affairs Claudia Schmied intends to appoint a new director for the Vienna State Opera on Wednesday after consultations with Federal Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer. Possible candidates for the position are Neil Shicoff, Christian Thielemann and Franz Welser-Mst. In addition, Dominique Mayer, head of the Parisian Theatre des Champs-Elysees, has now been brought into the discussion as a possible successor of the current Director Ioan Holender. He is the surprise candidate favored by the Vienna Philharmonic. [Der Standard, p. 1 and 31]

60th Anniversary of Marshall Plan

¶3. ORF TV in its prime time news program (Zeit im Bild) reports on the 60th anniversary of the Marshall Plan, which was celebrated in Vienna's Upper Belvedere Palace yesterday. The report quotes one of the key-note speakers, US Ambassador Susan McCaw, as saying that Austria benefited immensely from the Marshall Plan and that even though "Austria would have recovered from World War II without the Marshall Plan, the ERP helped accelerate Austria's recovery." The Ambassador stated that the Marshall Plan was not just about economic aid, but was also an investment in the future security and stability of Europe, the U.S. and the world. Austria's Economics Minister Bartenstein praised the ERP, which still exist today.

The Austrian Press Agency reports that at the ceremony a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the US and Austria to use ERP funds to support an exchange program for Austrian and American students. According to semi-official daily "Wiener Zeitung," Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik has suggested a plan for aid to developing countries along the lines of the Marshall Plan. She said that the US and the

EU should work together to assist poorer countries in the world. The EU already pays for half of the development assistance worldwide. Mass circulation tabloid "Heute" also reports on the anniversary event.

Don't Be Afraid Vladimir

14. All Austrian print and broadcast media are reporting on the G-8 summit of major industrial nations that opens today in Heiligendamm, Germany, amid a row between Washington and Moscow over a US missile defense system.

Independent daily Salzburger Nachrichten writes that in a speech in Prague on Tuesday, President Bush tried to mollify President Putin's recent criticism of the defense system by assuring him that Russia does not need to fear the system and offering Putin the opportunity to join it.

In the same speech, Bush also criticized the democracy deficits in Russia and China, writes centrist daily "Die Presse." He complained that the reforms in Russia were "off track" - a development that has serious consequences for democracy and has to be discussed. The Kremlin rejected Bush's criticism immediately, saying that Russia was "a democratic country, which shares the common values of the world and Europe."

Despite Bush's offer to Putin to participate in missile defense, it is feared that the conflict over this issue will overshadow the other central issues of the summit such as assistance for Africa and climate protection, writes the daily. Foreign affairs writer for independent daily "Der Standard" Christoph Winder comments on the missile defense debate: "The American argument that the missile defense system is defensive sounds plausible. It is hardly to be assumed that merely ten missiles could overturn the entire military strategy concept of the Russians." Why then, asks Winder, "is the atmosphere between America and Russia ... so extremely strained?" He sees the main reason for this in political symbolism and argues that "[t]he macho poses of the Cold War have by no means been overcome. However, the global challenges have changed so much over the last years that frivolous mock attacks as can be observed around this issue, are more superfluous than ever."

Washington Cuts Funds for Climate Research

15. Headlines liberal daily "Der Standard" and reports that the US is planning to send only four - and not six - satellites into space to research global warming. The Pentagon cited technical problems and increased costs as the reasons for the change. Climate change is one of the major topics at the G-8 summit.

The recent announcement of the US administration's intention to cut substantially the funds for climate protection comes at a time when everything seemed to be going smoothly: Last week, the US, China, Japan and Canada had outlined their concepts for an action plan against global warming, writes the daily, adding that G-8 summit hostess Angela Merkel only had to weave the threads together. Still, the US administration assured Merkel that it did not want to "take the stage" with the President's proposal that the 15 biggest polluters should agree on a common emission target by the end of 2008. The daily quoted US National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley as saying that this proposal was "[a]n attempt to move forward" and "an opportunity for Angela Merkel to lead this summit to success." On Wednesday, before the actual start of the summit, Bush will meet with Germany's Federal Chancellor for lunch. Afterwards, Merkel will also hold individual meetings with Sarkozy, Prodi and Putin.

US Judge Sentences Former Key White House Official Lewis "Scooter" Libby to 30 Months in Prison

16. The media reports that Libby remains free pending appeal. Libby was found guilty of obstruction of justice and perjury in March relating to the investigation into the unmasking of CIA officer Valerie Plame. Libby was the former chief of staff to Vice-President Dick Cheney.

McCaw